

## **Taking Back Education:**

### **Indigenous Peoples' Right to a Self-Determined Education**

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*Several human rights frameworks outline an individual's right to education. The human right to education encompasses a person's right to receive a free education at the fundamental stages and the parent's right to choose the type of education that is received. However, modern day human rights are biased towards Western culture and put Western concepts of education before the various perspectives of indigenous peoples. Historically, education has been used as a way to forcibly assimilate indigenous peoples. Specifically, in the United States, the federal government deemed Native Americans as "uncivilized" and "savage" and forced them into boarding schools where their cultures, languages, and agency were diminished. The right to self-determination allows indigenous peoples to collectively and individually determine their processes of education, yet that is often not the case in today's society. Education for indigenous peoples needs to be culturally relevant and should include their languages, cultures, and methods for teaching; they should have control over how they educate themselves and what they choose to teach.*

Education is a way in which we can recognize, respect, and honor other cultures and ways of life. However, indigenous peoples' right to education has been controlled by colonizers and Western beliefs for centuries. Indigenous peoples should have control over how they educate themselves. Their education needs to be relevant to their cultures and beliefs and should include their languages, cultures, epistemologies, and methods of teaching and learning.

The right to education is prescribed in several human rights documents, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Culture

Rights (ICESCR), and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). These documents also detail the right to self-determination, which gives people the right to practice their own culture as they see fit. Together the enshrined rights to education and self-determination should help to ensure that indigenous peoples have the right to practice education in ways relevant to their cultures. However, education has continuously been used as a way to take away part of indigenous peoples' self-determination.

Indigenous peoples have historically been oppressed and discriminated against in dominant societies. Colonizers have repeatedly forced them to assimilate to the dominant culture, likening them to "savages" and "uncivilized" people. Through the use of boarding schools, colonizers in the United States took away indigenous peoples' agency and forced them to learn in ways that were foreign to them. This resulted in a loss of culture and language and has effected indigenous peoples' success in school. The Navajo provide an example of how community controlled and culturally relevant education can help indigenous peoples have agency within their education.

This paper will begin by discussing what it means to be indigenous by defining terms relevant to this topic. Then it will detail the right to education and the problems that indigenous people have faced in regards to education. This section will explore human rights frameworks, forced assimilation, and struggles between Western and indigenous methods of educating. The paper will then give a concrete example, by providing a case study on Navajo education. Finally, it will conclude by discussing strategies that could be implemented to improve indigenous peoples' control over education and to increase their chances of academic success.

### **What does it mean to be Indigenous?**

In today's world, there are more than 300 million people in the world who are "said to be truly indigenous – living on lands which they have inhabited since time immemorial" (de Oliveira, 2009, p. 108). Indigenous peoples are a group fighting for recognition within a dominant society that challenges their cultures and ways of life. They are the first peoples of the world, yet they are continuously treated as though their lives are backwards and too "traditional" and are seen as a group in need of development. Yet the term "indigenous" is a difficult one to define. Through giving a concrete definition to the terms indigenous and indigenous peoples, the self-determination and control of their self-identity<sup>1</sup> is taken away from indigenous peoples. However, it is important to have an understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> Control over self-identity refers to indigenous peoples right to choose if they are indigenous and how they practice indigeneity. Basically, how they choose to "be indigenous".

what it means to be indigenous when discussing it in this paper. Jose R. Martinez Cobo, the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Problem of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, proposes a definition of indigenous as:

Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those which have a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems (as cited in Hodgson, 2011, p. 38).

While a definition for indigenous peoples must be given in order to understand the term in the context of this paper, defining who and what is indigenous should be left to those who choose to identify as indigenous. Dominant society should not label or define people based on perceptions of what their communities should or should not be. In other words, there is not a one size fits all definition of indigenous. It should be left up to indigenous peoples to define who and what is considered indigenous. This falls under indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, which is a fundamental human right to indigenous peoples (Pulitano, 2012). According to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the right to self-determination means that people have the right to decide their own political, economic, social, and cultural development. It also ensures indigenous peoples' autonomy in matters that relate to their internal or local affairs (United Nations, 2007.). It should be noted that other human rights frameworks, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) also mention the right to self-determination. Both documents state in the first article that all people have the right to self-determination (United Nations 1966a, 1966b).

The right to self-determination gives indigenous peoples the ability to define indigenous in their own terms. "Self-identification as indigenous or tribal [should] be regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which [indigenous rights] apply" (Engle, 2010, p. 70). The use of the word "peoples" implies that indigenous peoples are "groups of individuals with shared cultural, linguistic, and social features" (de Oliveira, 2009, p. 109). Without the use of the term "peoples" it is argued that there is no internal cohesion between different indigenous groups suggesting that self-determination does not apply (de Oliveira, 2009).

Understanding indigeneity and self-determination is necessary when explaining indigenous forms of knowledge and educating. Indigenous knowledge is effectively defined as "the cosmologies,

cultural beliefs, and webs of relationships, which are embodied in specific communities” (Overmars, 2010, p. 89). A majority of indigenous peoples prefer to take a holistic approach to education, which includes all aspects of their physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional identities (Wotherspoon, 2014). It is important for indigenous peoples’ education systems and curriculum to acknowledge their worldviews and epistemologies, which are intertwined with their holistic ways of life (Gayman, 2011).

### **Indigenous Peoples and Education**

Education is important to many people and is a way for cultures and languages to continue. However, the right to education does not fully consider all approaches and perspectives on teaching and learning. Historically, colonizers have used education as a way to control the “savage” peoples in the United States. Due to the forcible assimilation and inhumane treatment they have been subjected to, indigenous peoples’ cultures and languages have been wiped out. By gaining control over their education, indigenous peoples have a chance to continue and restore their cultures and languages so they are not forgotten or destroyed.

#### *The Right to Education*

The right to education is outlined in many documents pertaining to individuals’ human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is often seen as the beginning of modern-day human rights. Article 26 of the UDHR outlines people’s right to education, stating that everyone has a right to education, which shall be free at fundamental stages and should “promote understanding, tolerance, and respect among nations, races, ethnicities, and religious groups” (United Nations, 1948). The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which expands upon some of the fundamental human rights in the UDHR also addresses the right to education. Article 13 of the ICESCR states that the right to education cannot interfere with a person’s liberty and self-determination (ICESCR, 1966b). While these two human rights documents are meant to benefit all people, they fail to fully consider the differing needs of various groups and communities. Other human rights instruments, such as the International Labor Organization’s Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 169) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), address rights which are more applicable to indigenous peoples.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) was one of the first intergovernmental organizations to tackle the rights of indigenous peoples in ILO 169. Unlike the UDHR and ICESCR, ILO 169 recognizes collective rights and respects peoples differing cultures and values (Engle, 2010). The Convention

focuses on collective rights, which are more relevant to many indigenous peoples than the rights in other human rights instruments, which are more individualistic. ILO 169 states that “the social, cultural, religious, and spiritual values and practices of these peoples shall be recognized and protected” (International Labor Organization, 1991). The Convention further outlines indigenous peoples right to education in Articles 26 through 31. These articles detail indigenous peoples’ right to acquire an education. The Convention states that education programs and services should be developed to meet the needs of indigenous peoples. Education programs should incorporate indigenous peoples’ histories, ways of knowledge, value systems, and their future aspirations. ILO 169 also addresses indigenous peoples’ right to educate in their mother tongues or the language most relevant to the group in addition to the teaching of the county’s dominant language (International Labor Organization, 1991).

In addition to rights geared specifically toward indigenous peoples, the Convention also mentions the importance of the national community to eliminate discrimination and prejudice in education by ensuring that textbooks and materials are historically accurate and portray indigenous societies and cultures in a way that is fair and truthful (International Labor Organization, 1991). Often indigenous peoples are portrayed in a negative light within textbooks and other teaching materials. They have been depicted as savage and dangerous, living “traditional” lives in the wild while waiting for their “white saviors” (Gram, 2016). This right helps to ensure that their histories are told correctly and protects the dignity of indigenous peoples past and present.

UNDRIP can be seen as a foundation for the realization of indigenous peoples’ rights. The Declaration specifically addresses collective rights for indigenous peoples and their right to self-determination. In regards to education, UNDRIP details in Articles 13 and 14 indigenous peoples’ right to use, develop, and transmit their histories, traditions, language, and values, which can be done through education that indigenous people have the right to establish and control in ways appropriate to their cultures (United Nations, 2007). It is important to note that UNDRIP is a non-legally binding resolution. It is used as a framework to address indigenous issues and rights. When the Declaration came to fruition in 2007, the United States was one of four countries to vote against it. However, in 2010 President Barack Obama endorsed UNDRIP, which is a significant step in the United States affirming and acknowledging the rights and experiences of indigenous peoples (Chang, 2010).

Acknowledging the right to self-determination in conjunction with the right to education is important to the success of an education system that is culturally relevant to indigenous peoples. Only when these rights are “treated as fundamental components of all educational programming and policies for indigenous [peoples] will the rights of indigenous [peoples] to educational provision that respects

their culture and identity be realized” (Schimmel, 2007, p. 453). Self-determination gives indigenous peoples the right to determine their own ways of developing, having this right should allow them to determine their systems of education. This would allow indigenous peoples to incorporate their cultures, languages, and ways of knowing into their education, making it more applicable to their lifestyles.

### *Colonization and Education*

Native Americans have been subjected to the wrath of colonial powers for centuries. In the United States, colonizers found ways to justify their methods of taking the land of indigenous peoples. At first they relied on *terra nullius*, claiming it allowed them to control any territory that was not put to active use. This typically meant that any land not being used for agricultural purposes was up for grabs. Eventually colonizers turned to the use of treaties to take over Native American lands. However, many of the treaties were made through oral agreements so the Native Americans still had their land taken from them regardless of the treaty conditions (Engle, 2010).

Indigenous peoples in the United States also had struggles regarding their sovereignty. The United States federal government has routinely denied them of the ability to control their own territories. The Marshall Trilogies are a prime example of this. In the 1820s and 1830s the U.S. Supreme Court reached several verdicts related to Native American independence. The Supreme Court ruled that territory acquired by the federal government through discovery and conquest was valid and that indigenous peoples had no right to property that was taken from them. Additionally, they ruled that Native American Tribes were “domestic dependent nations” and they could not be treated as sovereign nations (Engle, 2010). When the United States took Native American lands, it made legal agreements that allowed tribes to have sovereign authority within the boundaries of their reservations (Engle, 2010). The idea of giving Native Americans sovereign authority is useful to the mission of the United States because it takes away indigenous power. It keeps the power in the hands of the United States, giving them the ability to decide whether or not Native Americans have sovereignty over their territories (de Oliveira, 2009). This ideology holds true for the United States control over indigenous education.

Indigenous peoples’ loss of agency over their own education is a direct result of colonial powers taking control of indigenous territories and education. The colonizers’ ideas about formal education overtook the ideas of indigenous peoples, lessening their agency over their approaches to learning and educating (Brightman, 1975). They labeled indigenous peoples as “savage” and “uncivilized” and forced them to assimilate to the dominant culture with the belief that they were making their lives “better”

(Gram, 2016). The United States government viewed Native Americans as a danger to their Anglo-American ways of life. They saw taking control of their education as a way to protect themselves from “the dangers of unassimilated and thus “uncivilized” population groups” (Gram, 2016, p. 256). The forced assimilation of Native Americans by the U.S. government was thought to be beneficial and helpful for the country’s indigenous peoples. It was seen as a way to help Native Americans escape from values and beliefs that were backward, which led to the loss of their cultures (de Oliveira, 2009; Gram, 2016).

In attempts to expunge indigenous knowledge, the U.S. government, as well as religious missions, set up residential schools across the country for Native Americans to attend. The goal was to spread Christianity, the European culture, and “sophistication” (Brightman, 1975, p. 20). The federal government was in a rush to civilize the Native Americans because of their desire to rid their new territory of the scary and so-called uncivilized ways. In order to achieve their goal of Native American assimilation they passed laws outlawing Native American spiritual practices and forced parents to send their children to Anglo-American schools (Brightman, 1975). Residential schools took children from their families and destroyed Native American cultures by forcing Native American children into schools and prohibiting them to practice elements of their culture and spirituality and to speak their language. The destructive colonial practice of forcible assimilation through education is still evident in indigenous education today (Schimmel, 2007; Overmars, 2010; Gram, 2016).

While the taking of Native lands and use of boarding schools took place before the conception of modern-day human rights, which occurred after World War II, it set the stage for colonizers controlling the education of indigenous peoples. They used education as a way to control the indigenous, whose uncivilized ways of life got in the way of their colonizing mission. These methods likely played a role in how the right to education was conceived and interpreted, leading to the right to be understood as the right to a Western or formal education. A modern-day example of colonial powers overtaking indigenous peoples control of education can be seen in Arizona’s ban on ethnic studies in public and charter schools. In 2010 the Arizona legislature passed a bill that banned classes “that promote resentment toward a race or class of people, are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group, or advocate ethnic solidarity instead of treating pupils as individuals” (Wiener, 2010, p. 5). It also prohibits all classes that “promote the overthrow of the [United States] government” (Wiener, 2010, p. 5). This ban displays how Western education can be harmful to indigenous or native peoples. By banning and excluding indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives it invalidates the experiences of indigenous and native peoples, often making them feel excluded and alienated from their peers and the

overall learning experience (Borja, 2012). The ban asserts power and control over indigenous peoples and displays how individualistic and Western ideals still take precedence over minority cultures and perspectives.

### *Problems Plaguing Indigenous Education*

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) definition of education is stated in broad terms, in order to account for the different ways of education and learning and is inclusive to diverse approaches to learning. It states that education is the "entire process of social life by means of which individuals and social groups learn to develop consciously within, and for the benefit of, the national and international communities, the whole of their personal capacities, attitudes, aptitudes and knowledge" (UNESCO, 1974). However, the right to education, as it has been established in the UDHR is not inclusive to the different ways of educating because it is assumed to mean the right to a formal Western education. It is biased towards Western ways of obtaining an education and does not take in to account that there are multiple approaches to education.

The human rights set out in the UDHR are essentially Western ideals and are not entirely relevant to indigenous communities (Pulitano, 2012). In 1945, when the document was conceived, the West was the dominant player in the United Nations, thus it was able to impose its perspective and philosophy of human rights onto the world (Mutua, 2002). This benefitted capitalistic and sovereign states, while the political, economic, and social systems in non-Western societies were changed or destroyed, which created many problems that human rights are meant to solve (Donnelly, 2013). As a whole, human rights are biased towards Western beliefs and cultures. The modern conception of human rights is essentially a mission to civilize "savages" and universalize Eurocentric norms. Human rights are understood to focus on strengthening and legitimizing the ideals of the liberal democratic state and spreading them to non-Western societies, which has a negative effect on indigenous peoples (Mutua, 2002). This ideal can lead to the destruction of indigenous cultures, languages, and histories and has contributed to the discrimination and oppression of indigenous peoples.

While human rights documents are meant to encompass universal rights, it fails to do so because it does not fully consider all cultures and differing perspectives and lifestyles. The human rights tools that discuss the right to education traditionally take an individualistic approach, failing to consider group rights that are more relevant to indigenous peoples. The individualistic and Western nature of the right to education does not take in to account collective rights and cooperation, which are relevant to indigenous peoples. These two conflicting ideas about human rights make it difficult for a universal right



to education to be feasible (Pulitano, 2012). When referring to education as a universal human right, the Western ways of educating are typically what is thought of. Yet the ways indigenous peoples teach and educate differs from what the Western world considers to be a “traditional” education. Since the right to education has been constructed from a Western perspective, indigenous peoples “are not having their cultural and cognitive ways recognized” (de Oliveira, 2009, pp 140). In order for indigenous people to fully benefit from the human right to education, it must be compatible with both Western and indigenous ways of educating (Gayman, 2011).

Western colonizers invaded upon various indigenous lands, which led to their values and beliefs taking over those of the indigenous. When Europeans encroached upon Native American territories in the United States, they introduced the Western education system, which had a significant effect on indigenous peoples’ ways of producing and transmitting knowledge (Overmars, 2012). These values are apparent within human rights frameworks, making them biased towards Western ideologies. Due to this bias, the right to education is focused on Western concepts of learning and education, rather than being inclusive of different cultures and perspectives. The values taught in Western education systems are often conflicting to those taught in indigenous communities, which makes learning difficult for indigenous students (Tippeconnic III & Tippeconnic, 2012). This can be seen in high school graduation rates in the U.S., where there is a significant disparity between Native people and the non-Native U.S. population. According to UNICEF, 65.5 percent of Native people in the U.S. graduate from high school, compared to 75.5 percent for the U.S population as a whole (Foy, 2003). Despite the gap in high school completion between Native American and non-native students, school systems have done very little to meet the needs of indigenous students, which adds to their feelings of alienation, inferiority, and lack of confidence in school (Manuelito, 2005).

The opposing views to education make it difficult for indigenous people to succeed within school systems. They also make it difficult for them to gain control over their own education. Many indigenous peoples’ desire an education curriculum that reflects cultural differences and acknowledges their cultures accurately and appropriately (Stavenhagen, 2015). For this to occur, the right to education must be inclusive and culturally relevant to all perspectives and cultures, not just those that align with Western models of education. Indeed, indigenous peoples’ chances of succeeding in the school system are much lower than non-Indigenous students due to the continued discrimination they face within education. In 1944, the United States Justice Department found that a school district in Utah discriminated against Native American students, violating the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, by failing to include an alternative language program for students. This practice, along with others carried over from the onset

of colonization, denies Native American students equal opportunities to education (Deyhle, 1995). School systems have routinely discriminated against Native Americans by restricting programs to help with their academic success. The lack of classes taught in indigenous languages, course options that feature indigenous histories, or teaching methods that are inclusive to indigenous cultures cause there to be a weak connection between students and what is being taught in the classroom.

Oftentimes indigenous societies are seen as “backward” or “uncivilized” and are thought to be in need of assistance to develop into more modern communities (Germond-Duret, 2016). The concept of forced modernity through education is problematic to indigenous peoples because it removes a large amount of their personal autonomy when making choices and decisions related to their education systems and teaching methods. This reinforces the idea that indigenous peoples are “different” and are an obstacle to modernization, because of their “traditional” ways of life. The belief that dominant society knows what indigenous peoples need, specifically in terms of education, leads to the loss of their cultures and self-determination. This can be seen in the United States use of boarding schools to forcibly assimilate Native Americans. Boarding schools for Native Americans were used to integrate them into dominant society and move them away from their “traditional” and “archaic” lifestyles. These schools were meant to turn Native Americans into “mirrors and messengers of Anglo-American” society (Gram, 2016, p. 256). The boarding schools stripped students of their identities as indigenous people by restricting the use of their cultures and languages, as well as subjecting them to psychological abuse (Heilig, Lopez, & Schram, 2013). This led to a loss of many indigenous languages and cultural practices, as well as individual and collective agency among Native Americans (Gram, 2016).

A Navajo parent said, “Our kids learn white history. When are [they] going to have Navajo language and culture, too?” (Deyhle, 1995, p. 418). Indigenous peoples have repeatedly been silenced in education. They need to be recognized in mainstream education. Their cultures and histories need to be depicted with the same level of importance and relevance as those in the dominant society. By including their experiences in education, it will help to combat their feelings of alienation.

### **Case Study: Navajo Education**

In 1864, approximately 9,000 Navajos were forcibly removed from their lands and incarcerated at a military post at Fort Sumner, New Mexico. Only 2,000 survived to return to their homeland four years later (Manuelito, 2005, p. 76). They returned to find their lands taken over by white settlers. Navajos refer to this as the *Hweeldi*, or the long walk, a time of great suffering (Manuelito, 2005). The white settler taking over the Navajo land put the political and economic control in the hands of the

settlers, which left little room for the Navajo's beliefs and attitudes toward education to be recognized (Deyhle, 1995). As a result of colonizers taking Navajo land, Navajos were forced to surrender all control of it. They surrendered with the condition that education be included in treaty negotiations. The United States government and the Navajo nation negotiated The Navajo Treaty of 1868. The treaty required that a classroom and teacher be provided for every 30 Navajo students (Manuelito, 2005). The lack of resources provided to reservation schools led to Navajo<sup>2</sup> students being sent to off-reservation boarding schools that denied them of their culture and agency.

Boarding schools were a way for the United States to take control of Native Americans and turn them into compliant citizens. The schools were insensitive and worked to destroy their languages and cultures. Children were often physically and verbally abused, not receiving nutritious food or an adequate education. In 1943, a residential school was built in the Ramah Navajo community<sup>3</sup>. The school was not equipped to meet the needs of the students. The school covered children from first to third grade and had only one teacher to teach them all. Once finishing the third grade, students had to attend boarding school far away from their homes and families (Manuelito, 2005). When children were sent away to boarding schools, often their families were not aware of the conditions they were subjected to. A Navajo student spoke about their time at a boarding school, speaking about the slave-like conditions they endured. They said, "Our parents did not know anything about the schools we went to...It didn't matter whether students were happy, lonely, or hurt. The main thing was for students to keep the buildings clean, the floors scrubbed and the students doing their duties" (quoted in Manuelito, 2005, p. 77). Boarding schools created for Native Americans did little to benefit their lives. They removed indigenous peoples from their homes, played a role in the destruction of their cultures, and continued the belief that Native Americans were "others" or "second-class citizens" rather than part of the dominant culture.

In order to assimilate the students to the dominant culture, they used Western teaching practices and taught information and skills that were pertinent to a modern life in the United States. The goal was to rid them of their cultural experiences and identities by teaching the Western ways of life. The curriculum and techniques used to educate students in these boarding schools was a contradiction to many of their preferred ways of learning. For the Navajo, education is more than textbooks and

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<sup>2</sup> Note that the experiences and perspectives discussed in this paper regarding Navajos are not the exclusive experiences of Navajo individuals, there are many differing experiences and perspectives to their education—there is more than one way to be Navajo (Deyhle, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Ramah Navajo community refers to a satellite community of Navajo Indians living outside of the reservation in New Mexico.

classrooms, it is about honoring the relationships and responsibilities they have to themselves, others, and the environment. To them, it is important that their education contribute to their understanding of their personal and Navajo identity (Manuelito, 2005). Their culture and identities were not being respected when the federal government implemented the use of boarding schools.

In the 1960s, education for the Navajos began to take a turn in a more positive direction. In 1965, the Navajo department of education joined with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, and non-profit organizations to begin a community controlled school on the Navajo reservation. The school, which was known as Rough Rock, was “the first school to be overseen by a locally elected, all-Indian governing board, and the first to incorporate systematic instruction in the native language and culture” (Manuelito, 2005, p. 75). In the 1970s, Navajos continued to make strides in community controlled education, earning funding from the BIA to begin the first community controlled high school. Soon after, New Mexico’s school superintendent threatened to shut down the school because the planned curriculum would include Navajo culture and history. That did not dissuade Navajos from continuing their mission for control over their education. Today their schools continue to teach and develop curriculum that is bilingual and multicultural (Manuelito, 2005).

The attempted shut down of the Navajo controlled schools was due to a disapproval of the material they were teaching, believing that it was not adequate because the conditions and goals were not the same as “traditional” public schools (Manuelito, 2005). This effort shows how education and schools are a source of conflict among communities. Dominant society can see them as a threat to the power and control they have over minority groups (Deyhle, 1995). Allowing Navajo culture and language into schools and curriculum would place them at a more equal level within society, which would go against the colonists and U.S government’s attempts to control and assimilate them.

Many Navajos believe education can be a way to advance and continue their identities and culture (Manuelito, 2005). Education can act as a protector of rights, languages, and cultures. However, in order for that to happen, indigenous experiences and rights must be recognized within curriculum and school systems. There needs to be a focus on including indigenous histories and cultures in education, so there are less feelings of alienation and a better sense of inclusion. The Navajo community controlled schools are a good example of how education can be positive for indigenous peoples. When they are in control and can choose what is being taught and how it is being taught, their cultures, languages, and histories will continue. The control will help to diminish feelings of alienation and otherness, so indigenous peoples can fully benefit from an education that is relevant to them and their lifestyles.

## **Strategies to Improve Indigenous Education**

Western education is often considered to be a “formal” education, stressing the importance of test scores and academic achievements. Federal governments typically think of education from a Western perspective, having more concern for indigenous peoples’ ability to read, write, or do math, as well as their ability to acquire skills necessary for the workforce. They do not take into account their “cultural, communal, or spiritual lives” or that they may have a desire to be “good hunters or pastoralists, good storytellers and spiritual leaders, and good transmitters of tradition” (Schimmel, 2007, p. 429). The required tests and textbook learning that is often characteristic of Western education does not reflect indigenous peoples’ holistic learning styles, which strive to engage the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental facets of a person (Wotherspoon, 2014). Through forced assimilation these practices have been forced onto indigenous peoples who have become expected to participate in Western style classroom settings even though those are not always applicable to their lives. UNESCO has stressed the need for education to be linguistically and culturally relevant to all people. The right to education should encompass and recognize the histories, values, languages, spiritual perspectives, and traditions of different cultures (Stavenhagen, 2015). When the right to education is culturally relevant to the lives of indigenous peoples they will benefit in multiple ways. The positive self-identification that they can acquire through their preferred methods of educating will help them to recognize and secure their rights on a broader scale and will give indigenous peoples greater stability and cohesion among the dominant culture (Schimmel, 2007).

### *Bilingual education*

A way to combat the dominant language’s takeover of indigenous languages is through bilingual education. Schools and education programs that teach both in the society’s dominant language and the necessary indigenous language provide significant advantages to indigenous peoples. It would allow for curriculum and materials to be more accessible and relevant to an indigenous person, making learning easier and helping them to gain self-confidence and self-awareness in matters pertaining to their indigeneity (Schimmel, 2007). This type of program allows for indigenous peoples to learn in their own languages, while also mastering their country’s official language. A bilingual education would help to ensure that indigenous peoples would be able to navigate the dominant society if they choose (Foy, 2003). By representing indigenous peoples in education curriculum by acknowledging and teaching in

their mother tongues, bilingual education programs will be a step to guaranteeing that indigenous peoples are able to fully access their right to self-determined education.

Many indigenous languages have been lost to colonialism. The U.S. government used education as a way to rid Native Americans of their languages by forcing them into schools taught solely in English (Manuelito, 2005). The teaching and use of English in schools, is in large part, a product of colonialism. Its use in forcibly assimilating indigenous peoples is a way for the colonial powers to assert and maintain dominance and further perpetuates the differences and inequalities between dominant society and indigenous communities (Jones, 2016).

While bilingual education has a variety of benefits – such as the continuation of indigenous languages, improved learning, and potentially better access to education – it also has its drawbacks. In order for an education program to be truly bilingual materials must be available in both languages, something that may not be financially feasible or easily accessible. It may also be difficult to find educators who are able to teach in the two different languages or that are willing to learn a new language (Foy, 2003).

### *Multicultural Education*

In order for the right to education and self-determination for indigenous peoples to be fulfilled, schooling with an emphasis on Western models of knowledge must become more relevant to indigenous ways of knowing. The key to this is to find a way to make indigenous knowledge and systems of educating and the Western system of schooling more compatible (Gayman, 2011). Multicultural education and normalization are strategies that could help to bridge the gap between indigenous and Western systems of educating. Western strategies in education are often seen as formal, such as sitting in rows of desks in front of a teacher while they lecture on a topic. Whereas indigenous education is seen as informal, often involving agricultural and spiritual practices. The dichotomy between the two approaches to education is an extension of colonialism and reinforces the belief that indigenous methods of educating cannot be compatible with Western ways. This paints an image that depicts indigenous peoples as being inferior and incapable of learning, which affects individuals' abilities to succeed in school (Brightman, 1975). The difference between ways of educating perpetuate the effects of forced assimilation through education and oppresses indigenous peoples' ability to learn and live as they choose.

Multicultural education could be beneficial to finding a compatible fit between the two different systems of education. It is a type of education that works towards equity for all students by

incorporating different viewpoints, principles, theories, and histories. The goal is to shift away from a Eurocentric approach to education to one that is more inclusive of differing backgrounds. This method builds on what individuals have rather than what they do not have, which lessens the feelings of otherness. It validates the diverse learning processes of indigenous peoples and confirms their experiences and cultural backgrounds giving learners confidence to succeed (Jones, 2016).

Along with multicultural education, normalization can help to validate the experiences of indigenous students. Normalization moves society away from focusing on differences to one of respect and regularity. With this theory, societies would respect cultural differences, regardless of their level of modernity or traditionalism, and avoid judgements in regards to their ways of life. By normalizing indigenous cultures within dominant society, it allows for equality within education. Moving away from the idea that indigenous methods of education are archaic or “traditional” and are in need of development and assistance would give them more opportunities to educate and teach in ways most relevant to them (Germond-Duret, 2016).

### *Culturally Responsive Schooling*

A key element that keeps indigenous children from school is the teaching methods and curriculum’s lack of cultural relevance to their lives. The Western methods of schooling can alienate indigenous peoples from their own cultures, as well as from those who practice different cultures. By giving indigenous cultures and languages a place within mainstream education it would help to ensure that schooling is relevant to indigenous peoples’ cultures and methods of teaching and learning. This strategy could be a beneficial way to combat the feeling of alienation and otherness that arise as a result of the West’s assimilation through education (Schimmel, 2007).

Culturally responsive schooling refers to learning that is rooted in a person’s own culture, while also being open to knowledge of other cultures (Foy, 2003). For indigenous peoples this means that their languages, cultures, and methods of learning can be incorporated into their education, while also learning about the dominant culture. This type of schooling allows things that are relevant to the lives of indigenous students to be incorporated into their learning (Tippeconnic III & Tippeconnic, 2012). Culturally responsive schooling does more than take differing cultural perspectives into account. It also requires educators to become more knowledgeable and aware of their students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds so they can incorporate those things into teaching. This method of schooling gives indigenous students the opportunity to take back or affirm their Native identities (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010).

While it is important to incorporate indigenous methods and cultures into their curriculum, it may also be necessary for some communities to retain some aspects of Western education. For some indigenous peoples, integration of the two methods may be more beneficial. Having a system of education that is culturally relevant to them will allow indigenous peoples to continue their customs and cultures. Incorporating some Western aspects of education may be beneficial to some if they choose to engage in the workforce of the dominant society (Overmars, 2010). The key to this is making sure that indigenous peoples are given the choice of how much Western influence is included in their systems of education.

### *Community-Based Education*

Due to education being used as a means of assimilation, indigenous peoples lost control over how schools are run and what is taught. Community based education is a way for them to gain control over their education. It is a strategy that seeks to incorporate indigenous knowledge into Western based education systems. This method attempts to mix an indigenous education framework with aspects of Western knowledge. This approach gives indigenous peoples the chance to express and operationalize their self-determination while being active participants in their education (Manuelito, 2005; Overmars, 2010).

The goal of community based education is to form a partnership between schools and communities. It gives communities the opportunity to have input on what is being taught. It also gives the students the chance to be more involved with their indigenous community by interacting with elders and other members in the community. This type of education focuses on subjects that are pertinent to the lives of indigenous students by teaching about their histories, creation stories, spiritual traditions, and beliefs (Overmars, 2010). Community based education gives indigenous peoples more control over their education. By giving them the control over what aspects of their lives are taught in their schools, it disrupts the power that colonizers and the Western education system have over their right to education (Overmars, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. Although UNDRIP is not legally binding, the ICCPR and ICESCR both have articles dictating peoples' right to self-determination. This right should allow people to practice their own culture however they see fit. However, indigenous peoples are often not able to educate or learn in ways that align with their culture. They have been forced to assimilate to



Western idea of education, ideals that were brought by white settlers, which has led to their cultures and languages being lost or destroyed. This brings up the question of whether human rights can truly be considered as universal. The rights laid out in these human rights frameworks are geared towards Western ideals and leave out differing perspectives and ways of life. This holds true for the right to education. While the right to education does not define education, or specify what type of education people are entitled to, it is typically assumed to mean the right to a formal Western education. Indigenous peoples' cultures, histories, and languages are disregarded and they are subjected to learning materials that are not completely relevant to their lives in settings that often contradict their culture's ways of learning and educating.

The strategies discussed earlier in this paper are a step in the right direction. Each suggested approach brings an element to indigenous peoples right to education that would make it more relevant to their lifestyles. However, the key to each of these tactics is the normalization of cultures outside of the dominant one. In theory, normalization will move society to a point where all cultures are respected and accepted. In other words, a society that is less judgmental and more open to differing perspectives and approaches to life (Germond-Duret, 2011). This proposed way of thinking has the potential to help move society away from the binary thinking of the West versus the rest.

The right to education needs to be reworked. It needs to detail the importance of including various cultural perspectives. While it stresses the need for education to be understanding, tolerant, and respectful to all nations, races, ethnicities, and religious groups, it does not completely hold up to what it says (see: United Nations, 1948). The right to education needs to state that people have a choice on how they educate, because the reality is that not all communities or groups want to learn in ways that align with a formal Western education. Perhaps this is an idealistic thought, but all individual and group perspectives and approaches to education need to be recognized within the right, and currently it fails to do that.

Another crucial step to ensure indigenous peoples approaches and perspectives are recognized within education is to include them within the education systems of the dominant society. Incorporating indigenous histories and classes on their cultures and languages into the dominant education curriculum can be beneficial to all students. By incorporating these things into education, it helps to remove inaccurate judgements towards indigenous peoples and would begin to conquer the alienation and feelings of otherness indigenous peoples often feel when participating in the education systems of dominant society (Jones, 2016).

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination, which gives them the right to determine how they practice their culture. Approaches to education and learning are encompassed in indigenous peoples' culture. Education for indigenous peoples needs to be in their control. Their methods and systems of education need to be culturally relevant and should include their cultures, languages, and histories. Human rights that are biased towards Western ideals and colonial powers have effected indigenous peoples' ability to control their education. In the United States, education has been used as a way to forcibly assimilate indigenous peoples, which has contributed to their alienation and otherness within society. Through culturally relevant education that incorporates indigenous cultures and normalization, indigenous peoples can begin to gain control of their education.

Education is a way people all over the world can connect. Learning about other people and their cultures is key to understanding, respecting, and honoring those that are different from you. Without a right to education that fully encompasses all individual's and group's approaches to education, this connection is not as powerful as it could be. Education needs to be culturally relevant so cultural and cognitive ways can fully be recognized.

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